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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the concepts of "culture" and "multicultural education" and advocates multicultural education for rural schools. Culture applies to any group with coherent norms and traditions that help members engage the world around them. Multicultural education seeks to create an environment in which students can understand, respect, and ultimately value cultural diversity. Multicultural education in rural schools merits attention for several reasons, including the changing character of rural life and educational needs and the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of American society. Three considerations bear on making multicultural education work in rural schools: (1) to reduce cultural isolation and to gain a multicultural perspective, students should first learn about their own culture in order for them to understand and respect other cultures; (2) school practices to address cultural diversity are varied, but attention to the following areas are critical for success--mission, staffing, curriculum and instruction, home and community linkages, extracurricular activities, and student characteristics; and (3) evidence exists that multicultural education is important in making schooling more relevant, decreasing racial stereotyping, and increasing the self-confidence of ethnic minority students. Multicultural education can help individuals and communities value and preserve their own cultural uniqueness and can also serve the same function more generally so that the American multiculutural society values and preserves itself. (LP)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools August 1992

Charting New Maps: Multicultural Education in Rural Schools

by Jenny Penney Oliver and Craig Howley

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THE UNITED STATES is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse nations in the world. This circumstance holds implications for education even in places where the local population is not very diverse, as often happens in rural areas (Spears, Oliver, & Maes, 1990). This Digest briefly reviews the concepts of "culture" and "multicultural education." It then considers the relevance of multicultural education for rural schools in which neither ethnic nor cultural diversity is great.

Culture and multicultural education

One view interprets culture as a sort of map that provides "standards for deciding what is...what can be...how to feel...what to do, and...how to go about doing" (Goodenough, 1963, p. 258-259). Culture comprises traditional ways of making sense of and conducting oneself in the world. It shapes unspoken values, as well as social institutions such as education, religion, marriage, and work (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). Needless to say, cultures vary immensely. Culture applies to any group with coherent norms and traditions that help members engage the world around them. It governs how people share information and knowledge, as well as how they construct meaning.

Because the United States is a multicultural society, citizens need to understand and respect one another, both as individuals and as members of culturally distinct groups. To this end, education that is multicultural (Grant & Sleeter, 1989)—or simply "multicultural education"—has received considerable attention. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (1982) describes multicultural education as "preparation for the social, political and economic realities individuals will experience in culturally diverse and complex human encounters...providing a process for individuals to develop competencies for perceiving, evaluating, and behaving in different cultural settings" (p.14).

Multicultural education nonetheless represents a change in educational thinking. After all, social structures in most nations often put minorities at a disadvantage, and the United States is no exception according to many observers (e.g., Anderson, 1990). State-supported schooling in the United States, for instance, began with the attempt to "Americanize" immigrant populations. Knowledge of other cultures (e.g., those of immigrants) seldom figured in school curricula, with the result that students often developed narrow views of the world (Boyer, 1990).

Whereas critics of multicultural education worry that it may fragment students' views of culture (Hartoonian, 1988), supporters believe this view to be short-sighted. In fact, many supporters do not propose a specific multicultural curriculum at all. Rather, they have in mind a framework from which to shape curriculum and carry out instruction. The aim is to help students understand how culture not only shapes, but also limits, their actions. Such understanding permits students to perceive both their own culture and others in a more critical light (Spears et al., 1990). In this sense, multicultural education seeks to create an environment in which students can understand, respect, and ultimately value cultural diversity.

Why multicultural education in rural schools?

Multicultural education in rural schools merits attention for several reasons. First, the character of rural life is changing (Deaton & McNamara, 1984), and thus rural needs are changing as well (Stern, 1992). Historically, rural schools have responded to a full range of educational, personal, and professional needs in their communities. Faced with economic, technological, and demographic changes, rural communities and schools are, however, recognizing the need to look outside, rather than only within, for answers to questions about human meaning and purpose. Second, after its founding, the United States welcomed the immigration of people from many differing ethnic and religious backgrounds. Many groups settled in rural areas, making contributions that persist to this day. Third, recent demographic trends, including continued immigration to the United States, are rapidly increasing the ethnic and cultural diversity of American society.

These developments make interaction among individuals and groups with quite different backgrounds increasingly more common. Certainly such interaction will be more productive if carried out on the basis of mutual understanding and respect, rather than suspicion and prejudice. Three considerations bear on making multicultural education work in rural schools, as follows: (1) reducing cultural isolation in rural schools, (2) adapting practice to accommodate local needs, and (3) the nature of outcomes.

Reducing cultural isolation

Pearse (1989) warns that the lack of contact with—or complacency about—other cultural and ethnic groups will place students at a disadvantage. Multicultural understanding helps students overcome the cultural isolation that lack of ethnic diversity in rural areas may impose. It prepares rural students with the broader understanding of culture that the future will most certainly require.

The purposes of multicultural education are compelling, however, only when rural schools make sense of them in terms of their own circumstances (Spears et al., 1990). This seeming paradox rests on the fact that rural traditions are part of the cultural diversity of the United States. Rural students, therefore, can understand other cultures best when they understand their own culture well. Educators such as those involved with the Foxfire Network understand this principle (Wigginton, 1985). Foxfire engages students in examinations of their own cultures, partly as a way to show students the meaning of culture.

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Adapting practice

School practices designed to address diversity are, in fact, as varied as rural communities themselves. Whatever the scope of the multicultural effort, Spears and colleagues (1990) suggest that attention to the following features are critical for success: mission, staffing, curriculum and instruction, home and community linkages, extracurricular activities, and student characteristics.

Rural schools reported a number of successful strategies to increase the ethnic diversity of their staffs (Spears et al., 1990). Programs like "Teach for America"—and connections with schools of education—helped secure ethnically diverse staff as visiting or resource teachers. Sometimes, these visiting teachers became permanent faculty. Some rural districts also recruited ethnically diverse teachers, whom they rotated among schools. When neither of these strategies was possible, white teachers visited multi-ethnic schools or took part in workshops about cultural diversity.

Some schools provided students and teachers with materials or inaugurated instructional events that reflected cultural diversity. Strategies included (1) replacing older textbooks with ones that treated multicultural issues, (2) using packaged multicultural materials, (3) selecting relevant library materials or supplementary texts to be used in student assignments, and (4) using ethnic holidays and celebrations as the basis for class assignments and school celebrations.

Cultivating links between home and school also proved to be essential. Strategies to enlist parental support included (1) participation in planning, (2) developing newsletters about the progress and purpose of the multicultural effort, (3) inviting parental participation at cultural events and on field trips, and (4) conducting family workshops about cultural diversity.

Extracurricular activities included making field trips to museums and cultural festivals or inviting speakers to address students. Hosting exchange students was another successful strategy. Exchange students often became celebrated members of the community and willingly served as speakers at community events.

Outcomes

Due in part to the continuing debate over how to define multicultural education—why it should be and for whom it is intended—little has been written about "hard" outcomes. But evidence does exist that multicultural education makes a difference. This evidence generally emerges from the local meaning—symbolic or personal—that participants assign to multicultural reform.

Spears and colleagues (1990) reported that, to some participants, multicultural education made school more "relevant," contributing, they believed, to decreased rates of dropping out. Others reported a decrease in racial stereotyping, leading to better relationships among students. Among ethnic minority students, a cultural "grounding," or sense of belonging was reported, and demonstrated through behaviors indicating increased self-confidence.

Oliver (1991) established a positive relationship between racial attitudes of white college students and exposure to practices associated with multicultural education, with curriculum and instruction representing the strongest influence. Tomlinson (1990), who introduced multicultural reforms in 23 British schools, reports more egalitarian and sensitive attitudes as evidence of the value of multicultural education.

Multicultural education and society

Many rural communities are now facing a cultural crisis (Berry, 1990). Societies experience such crisis when cultural traditions no longer conform to the preoccupations and needs of everyday life (Nash, 1974). Outmigration, profound restructuring of the rural economy, and the increase in rural poverty (Stern, 1992) add to the crisis.

Multicultural education can help individuals and communities value and preserve their own cultural uniqueness. It can also serve the same function more generally, so that our multicultural society values and preserves itself.

Multicultural education offers a relevant view of educational purpose in an increasingly complex world. It is not a quick fix. It does, however, provide a map from which to chart the future, and it can help educators and communities challenge arrangements that reproduce inequity (Sleeter, 1992).

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